The New York Times
The Washington Times E-3
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 10 Oct '87

MAX LERNER

The hot history of Casey

Bob Woodward has hit it lucky in the timing of his book, whether you think of it as one on "The Secret Wars of the CIA," as the subtitle puts it or as a portrait of William Casey, the agency's director.

Mr. Casey's role in the Iran-Contra affair has thrown a shimmering curtain of mystery around the man, both in his living and his dying, his elusive persona and his even more elusive mental processes. The question is how effectively Mr. Woodward has pierced the "veil" around the agency, which forms his one-word title for the book.

STAT

The current flurry of print and TV publicity has mostly picked up Mr. Woodward's theatrical account of a four-minute hospital visit with the dying man, a failed CIA effort to assassinate a terrorist leader in Beirut and an unsparing quote about the mind of Ronald Reagan.

How authentic are these psychodramas Mr. Woodward reports? Understandably, Sophia Casey, Bill Casey's widow, calls the account of the hospital visit an outright lie and the rest trashy gossip.

For myself I take Mr. Woodward's word that his penetration of Mr. Casey's hospital security and his remarkable access to him all through his CIA tenure were actual happenings. This doesn't mean accepting without question his interpretation of Mr. Casey's words and thought processes, especially since he can't announce publicly whatever documentation he has for them. That's the problem with the kind of "hot history" Mr. Woodward and other investigative reporters write. I used the phrase in a Saturday Review essay on his book (written with Carl Bernstein) about Richard M. Nixon's "Last Days." I thought it also applied to Mr. Woodward's later book on the Supreme Court, "The Brethren."

Bob Woodward

His brand of investigative journalism marks the '70s and '80s as an era of accelerated inquiry and instant communication. T.S. Eliot long ago saw it coming, with his "hurry up, quick, it's time." Mr. Woodward had a choice of writing a documented recent history of the CIA or a biography of Mr. Casey or a reportage on both. He chose the last. The first would have taken more time, scholarship and reflection. The centerpiece of either would have to be the life journey of a man who was complex and whose character was as elusive as any on the Washington scene.

Writing about a Casey manuscript on the history of the Office of Strategic Services, Mr. Woodward says, "It had two main characters" — Wild Bill Donovan and Mr. Casey himself. I might add that Mr. Woodward's account also has two chief characters — Mr. Casey and Mr. Woodward, in whatever order.

As an account of CIA history it is of necessity selective. While not as harsh as the Seymour Hersh revelations which brought havoc to the CIA in the '70s, it will inevitably add to the hostile climate surrounding the CIA after the Iran-Contra hearings.

This is true of Mr. Woodward's portrait of Ronald Reagan as well. It is part of the liberal media tradition which sees John F. Kennedy as the last true American president. Mr. Woodward's report of a Casey conversation depicts Mr. Reagan as a study in emotional passivity and presidential irresolution, as well as irremediable laziness of mind and energies. It may be so, but it doesn't ring true for the kind of relationship Mr. Casey had with his president. Just as the Richard Nixon we now perceive in history belies the one portrayed in Woodward and Bernstein's "Last Days," so perhaps the Ronald Reagan of history will survive the portrait in Mr. Woodward's new book.

As for Mr. Casey himself, the picture that emerges is largely believable. He did find, after he saw Dachau, "there is verifiable evil in the world." He was, in fact, an activist CIA director who felt that his job was to be of some account in history.

Most of all, he was a risk-taker — a ropewalker who finally fell into the abyss. Denied the chance to be secretary of state, he wanted to make policy nonetheless, and he exulted in doing it behind the scenes.

His dying, after a dubious decision to undergo brain surgery for lymphoma was as risk-laden as his living. Mr. Woodward may tack too much meaning onto Mr. Casey's nod in response to the question of his knowledge of Contra funding. He may do the same with Mr. Casey's faltering, "I believe" in response to Mr. Woodward's quote, "Why?"

Yet I see this journalistic book as a contribution of some merit to a real biography still to come.

Max Lerner is a nationally syndicated columnist.

Page 23.